

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 135 304

HE 008 672

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TITLE Illusions and Realities of Managing for Planned Change.
PUB DATE 23 Feb 77
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the California Association for Institutional Research Annual Conference (February 23, 1977).

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrative Problems; *Change Strategies; Collective Bargaining; Democracy; *Educational Planning; *Governance; *Higher Education; *Institutional Administration; *Management; Management by Objectives; Organizational Change; School Organization; Theories
IDENTIFIERS Consensus

ABSTRACT

There are several commonly accepted college and university governance concepts and management styles: (1) the assumption that organizational goals can be precisely defined and that institutional processes are widely understood; (2) the collective bargaining concept, which assumes that there are fundamentally conflicting interests within the organization; (3) the democratic approach to institutional governance; and (4) the consensus approach, which assumes that institutional authority rests with those who are willing to debate issues and arrive at decisions through mutual agreement. These models have serious shortcomings, both as reflections of reality and as prescriptions for change by leadership. Institutional researchers can play a significant role in the management of planned change if they avoid functioning under many of the present management myths and illusions. Colleges and universities are characterized by hazy goals, an unclear technology, and fluid participation, which make them more difficult to describe, understand, and function in. (Author/MSE)

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ILLUSIONS AND REALITIES OF MANAGING FOR PLANNED CHANGE

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Presented at the California Association for
Institutional Research Annual Conference,
February 23, 1977.

Illusions and Realities of Managing for Planned Change

Introduction

The purpose of this paper will be to outline several commonly accepted concepts of college and university governance. Specific attention will focus on several illusions about college and university decision making, the distribution of power inherent in these concepts, and their influence on managing planned change. Finally, several suggestions will be offered that institutional researchers may wish to employ to help academic managers achieve planned change.

Governance Concepts and Management Styles

Much of the literature and commentary concerning college and university management over the past decade has provided numerous descriptions and ideas about governance, vis-a-vis, decision making and the distribution of power. I hope to show that several widely held concepts of institutional governance and the decision making styles they influence are not especially useful in achieving planned change. To do this I will highlight four of the most common models of university governance as described by Cohen and March.¹

First, is an administrative model that assumes organizational goals can be defined precisely and operationally and that the technology (institutional processes) of these organizations is well defined and widely understood. It is also assumed that performance criteria

¹Michael D. Cohen and James G. March, Leadership and Ambiguity: The American College President (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1974), pp. 29-40.

relating to institutional goals exist and are used to evaluate organizational components objectively.

Second, the collective bargaining model assumes that there are fundamentally conflicting interests within the organization. It is further assumed that each of the contending interest groups can be sufficiently organized, negotiated with, and held to honoring the outcome of those negotiations. It is assumed that demands can be reconciled, usually through the introduction of mutually credible information with respect to the flexibility of demands and the reality of sanctions.

Third, the democratic model assumes educational institutions are communities with "electorates" consisting of students, faculty, alumni, citizens, parents, or some subset of those groups. Members of electorates are assumed to be able to form coalitions. Elections or votes of confidence occur often enough to ensure that agreements will be enforced. It is assumed that managers want to remain in their positions and therefore seek continuous support of the electorate.

Finally, the consensus model assumes that institutional authority resides with those willing to debate issues and arrive at decisions through mutual agreement. Decisions thus reached are enforced on the system until changed by a subsequent decision (which could of course, involve a different constellation of individuals). This approach to governance assumes that most decision situations in the institution are susceptible to being translated into a discussion of the current concerns of any active participant.

My experience and the findings of educational researchers indicate that most university decision makers function under some mix of these four governance models. For most institutions these models clearly contain some elements of truth. However, they also pose serious shortcomings, both as descriptions of institutional reality and as prescriptions for leaders to initiate change. The following comments will outline several reasons for this.

In the case of those who perceive governance as the management of goal oriented activities the prime difficulty lies in the assumption of well-defined goals and institutional technology. This is not a reality in most colleges and universities because, as Cohen and March have pointed out, goal statements typically fail one or more of the following tests:

First, is the goal clear? Can one define some specific procedure for measuring the degree of goal achievement? Second, is it problematic? Is there some possibility that the organization will accomplish the goal? Is there some chance that it will fail? Third is it accepted? Do most significant groups in the university agree on the goal statement? For the most part, the level of generality that facilitates acceptance destroys the problematic nature or clarity of the goal. The level of specificity that permits measurement destroys acceptance.²

In the case of those who perceive governance as management by mediation and facilitation of compromise the prime problem lies in the assumptions made with respect to the organization of public consent. This model of governance assumes that conflicting interest groups are sufficiently well defined and organized to be represented, that sets of demands can be reconciled through negotiations, and that participants will honor the outcome of those negotiations.

²Ibid., pp. 195-96.

A major problem inhibiting governance by an electorate lies in the assumption that members of numerous interest groups are willing and able to exchange extensive information about possible coalitions. In addition, the involvement of faculty, students, alumni, employers, citizens, etc., greatly inhibits decision making efficiency.

Finally, in the case of those who perceive governance as consensus management a major problem lies in the reality of rather loose requirements for decision making consistency over time, and rather tight requirements for agreement among those active at any moment.

On the whole, the educational organization literature supports the contention that the governance models previously outlined, including their shortcomings, are descriptive of the way most educational decision makers currently function. The common denominator among them appears to be role behaviors that are reactive to the demands of others, as well as, a relatively continuous public posture. Unfortunately, these behaviors do not conform to the widely held stereotype of management which prescribes role behaviors characterized by planning, organizing, motivating and controlling responsibilities resulting in the initiation of ideas, plus the establishment of personnel structures and organizational procedures designed to achieve predetermined objectives.

If many institutional decision makers are functioning in a reactive mode rather than as catalysts for change, one might hypothesize that the traditional management responsibilities are not being widely practiced in colleges and universities. March and Cohen found this to be the case, at least for planning, when studying the role of university presidents.

They found that presidents believe in comprehensive planning, but do virtually none of it. In trying to explain this inconsistency they wrote:

We believe that the phenomena of planning--and the corresponding presidential attitudes--are the striking consequences of the inconsistencies between universities as organizations and the models of organizations with which presidents are familiar. Plans, in their usual form, particularly long-run comprehensive plans, presume substantial clarity about goals, substantial understanding of the basic technology of the organization, and substantial continuity in leadership. Universities have none of these, except in the capital-physical-fiscal-planning area. Presidents frequently come to the presidency from outside the organization and are frequently succeeded by someone from outside the organization. Their terms are short relative to the length of time involved in a "plan." . . . Presidents emphasize the importance of making a mark on the institution. They have little stake in continuity with the past. They may hope for continuity with the future, but they would have to be extraordinarily naive to expect their successor to spend much time "implementing" someone else's plan. Despite the obeisance paid it, comprehensive planning has little reality for presidents in the form in which we usually conceive it.³

Implications for Institutional Researchers

I believe institutional researchers can play a significant role in the management of planned change if they avoid functioning under many of the present management myths and illusions of governance outlined earlier. Instead researchers must remember that colleges and universities are characterized by hazy goals, an unclear technology, and fluid participation (where participants vary in the amount of time and effort they devote to the institution). These factors do not make educational institutions bad organizations or disorganized ones; but they do make it a problem to describe, understand, and function in.

³Ibid., p. 114.

The illusions and realities of institutional governance in terms of management responsibilities, distribution of power, and decision making should be of primary concern to all institutional researchers. The following suggestions are intended to identify ways researchers can clarify their roles in the context of existing governance practices while at the same time subtly influence those processes to support the management of planned change.

Institutional researchers will not be able to maximize their effectiveness unless they thoroughly understand the governance processes employed within their institutions. Therefore, my first suggestion is intended to encourage researchers to identify the management and decision making styles of executive officers, deans, and department heads. Specifically, I encourage researchers to identify how decision makers function in the following four domains.

1. Preparing the operating budget and the distribution of financial resources among their subordinates.
2. Establishing educational policy especially as it relates to curricular and academic organization.
3. Granting tenure to individual academic personnel.
4. Planning for capital expenditures, academic development, and institutional growth.

These four domains do not include all the decisions made within the college or university that might concern executive officers, deans, and department heads but they are some of the most important activities of educational governance. By understanding how decision makers function in these domains institutional researchers will be better able to identify who they can effectively serve and in what ways.

My second suggestion addresses the myth that executive officers control governance processes and therefore are major catalysts for change. Reality indicates that college and university decision processes are not easily characterized in simple power terms. More importantly, most decisions of significance rest outside the influence of top executives and reside within the domains of deans and department chairpersons. This is true for the following reasons. First, these decision makers are usually very familiar with what their faculty and staff are doing, the issues and problems facing their units, and what changes are desirable. Therefore, given support and assistance they can often develop objectives for change in a less ambiguous way than is possible for institutional goals.

Second, by virtue of their administrative position, deans and department heads can act as catalysts for change by creating opportunities to gently upset outdated perceptions of what their units are doing.

Third, these decision makers can employ planning to develop a new understanding of their units, however, such planning should be preceded by evaluation and result in a set of decisions for future action. With regard to evaluations researchers should keep in mind that much of what higher education is about can be described as a social experiment. As nearly as I can determine, there is nothing in a formal theory of evaluation that requires specific criteria be specified in advance. In this context the results of unit evaluations should be examined by faculty and middle managers in terms of what is believed to be important at that point in time.

Finally, through resource reallocation deans and department heads are in a much better position than executive officers to initiate planned change if new resources are unavailable.

For these reasons I suggest that institutional researchers become familiar with the issues and concerns confronting academic unit leaders. This can be accomplished in several ways. For one, researchers can meet informally with these administrators and listen to their needs. Such meetings may reveal topics that researchers may wish to investigate.

A second strategy that might be employed would require researchers to initiate a program or unit review (whichever is most reasonable) utilizing much of the descriptive data available to them through central data sources. The data review process should result in a quantifiable descriptive profile of trends in enrollments or clientele served, faculty and staff salaries, financial support, program offerings, and faculty workloads. Other data can be included but these categories are considered essential because they focus attention on management issues and policy questions.

As I see it, such reviews can accomplish several things. First, they can provide an agenda for discussions between researchers and decision makers on issues of interest to both. Second, if the availability of review data coincides with budget planning, the probability of its use during that process is greatly enhanced. Third, discussions with decision makers about issues and policy questions resulting from the review can provide institutional researchers with some feeling for the management and governance styles of persons in leadership positions. Fourth, the review process can produce additional questions about organizational problems or concerns that may warrant more careful evaluation. Finally, the review process provides researchers with opportunities and challenges that will help them establish a management consultant image.

The realities associated with academic change indicate that unit problems and policy issues identified through a review process must be selected and acted upon by deans or department heads. This is essential because institutional researchers and executive officers lack legitimacy with regard to the political process associated with initiating unit change.

I also recommend that institutional researchers be selective when identifying the decision making issues they wish to pursue further and then devote as much time as is necessary to address them. This recommendation is based on the premise that one who is in a position to devote time to decision making activities within the institution has considerable claim on the system. This is true for several reasons. First, institutions are energy poor when it comes to allocating personnel time to decision issues. Second, by spending time on the homework for a decision, one becomes a major information source in an information poor world. Finally, by investing time in organizational concerns, one increases ones chance of being present when other important issues are being considered. Since it is often difficult to anticipate when and where a particular issue will arise, the simple frequency of availability is relatively important.

My final recommendation encourages institutional researchers to be persistent. It is a mistake to assume that if a particular idea, policy issue, or proposal is rejected today, it will be rejected tomorrow. Different sets of people and concerns will be reflected each time a problem is considered or a proposal discussed. Wait for opportunity to knock because one who persists in a variety of contexts is frequently rewarded.

In closing, I wish to caution institutional researchers not to function under illusions of governance that inhibit the exercise of management responsibilities and planned change. In addition, I encourage those researchers who currently provide extensive staff support to executive officers to find ways to assist deans and department chairpersons. Finally, I hope researchers will assess their services in the context of institutional realities relating to all aspects of governance and strive to function as legitimate actors within them.

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